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Old Time Concerts on the Baccalieu Trail: A Project-Based Training Case Study

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The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) has been developing a project-based training model for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in which communities are guided, step-by-step, through the creation of a cultural documentation or celebration project. In 2010, the ICH office of HFNL sponsored an open community meeting with different stakeholders in the Baccalieu Trail region, an area encompassing many smaller communities, about an hour's drive from the provincial capital of St. John's. It included town council members, historical society members, and interested people from the community. HFNL brought them together and asked, "What matters to you? What are you worried about losing in your community?"

Participants were led through a process of facilitation where they were introduced to the categories of ICH, as defined by UNESCO. Participants then wrote down all the things they could think of in their neighbourhoods and communities in the region.

Participants looked at the long list of items of ICH they had identified. They then selected the top five or six things that they thought were most under threat in their communities. They did this utilizing a voting system where every participant checked off the items that they thought to be interesting, at threat, or things that needed to be worked on by the communities.

A Tradition Under Threat

This particular group of communities decided that the tradition that was most under threat, for them, was the tradition of old-time community concerts. These are non-professional concerts that are often performed in town parish halls. Concerts include traditional music, the recitation of verse and stories, and humorous skits or short plays. They can also include the performance of traditional dances and the sharing of traditional foods.

Participants in the session expressed concern that artistic performance in the province was becoming increasingly professionalized, and that they wanted to celebrate art at a local level.

Once a topic was chosen by the participants, they were questioned about local needs and gaps in terms of cultural expertise. Training in cultural documentation and oral history collection was identified as a need, so HFNL developed training workshops on those techniques.

At a later workshop, participants were taught how to use audio recording equipment, how to develop questions, how to develop consent forms, and how to contribute to the provincial inventory of ICH.

Local tradition-bearer Wendell Dawe, who had been involved in the organization of traditional concerts, was brought in to be interviewed as part of the workshop. That sample interview was recorded by participants, and was then included as part of the province's online inventory of ICH.

After that workshop, HFNL staff conducted more interviews with tradition-bearers in the region. One local tradition-bearer, who had worked a lot with recitation and community concerts, was the featured tradition-bearer in HFNL's monthly newsletter, and all audio interviews conducted on the topic were added to the province's ICH inventory.

More community meetings and teleconferences were held to plan out a series of community concerts. Collectively, the participants determined where and when events would be held, and the groups sponsoring each concert agreed on a standard ticket price for the events. Three communities sponsored concerts, and each community identified and determined who would perform in their local concert.



The HFNL office packaged all these community events together as one festival which was held April 28th to the 30th, May 6th to May 25th, 2011. Concerts were held in the towns of Heart's Content, Cupids and Bay Roberts. HFNL produced a festival poster and website, which had information on the individual concerts, but which also linked back to the collected audio and photographic material on the provincial ICH inventory.

Project Costs

The project-based training model does require a certain outlay of time and resources, particularly for the training and workshop components. In the Baccalieu Trail Old-Time Community Concert project, HFNL staff worked with the communities through the process of planning and implementing their project, providing project-specific training and community-based workshops throughout the duration of the project. HFNL provided publicity, printed posters, and created a website for the event. Funding was used to support an ICH projects assistant position, who organized meetings, coordinated travel, arranged and publicized workshops,



Old Time Concerts & Times

"You'd start singing and you would sing all night until it was time to go to bed. Everyone sang and everyone loved it," says Stewart Letto of L'Anse au Clair in a 2003 Northern Pen article on the topic of community 'times'. Letto often sang while seated on the floor because the kitchens of his southern Labrador community were so crowded with people having a 'time'.

Times were informal gatherings that served as the nerve centre of the outport social world. They most often took place over the cold fall and winter months because the fishery occupied people from dawn to dusk in the summer. The entertainment at these social events included singing, dancing, playing musical instruments and storytelling.

Old time concerts, unlike 'times', were organized, more formal affairs involving entire communities and revolving around a specific event like Christmas, Easter or St Patrick's Day. While music was the cornerstone of these performances, concerts also involved skits, dances, drills, recitations and full-length plays. The dramas, songs and tunes were based on published works, but concerts also included local compositions. The concerts took place in schoolhouses and were put off by the children and staff but churches and town halls also provide a venue for these events.

— EMILY URQUHART



(Left to right) Identifying community ICH in Cupids (Dale Jarvis); Community Concert, Bay Roberts (Neddal Ayad); A Christmas Drill, Bay Roberts (Neddal Ayad); School concert, Port de Grave, circa 1960s (Mona Petten); Concert Poster (Graham Blair).

Peter Laracy: When you think about going to school here and growing up in Cupids do you have memories of old time concerts that would take place here?

Wendell Dawe: Well actually just the school concerts, really.

Peter Laracy: Perhaps you could describe for me some of the things that would happen at those concerts.

Wendell Dawe: Well of course, back then there was three teachers here at the school. And when we got to the middle grades, say grades four, five and six, that's the time that I can recall concerts, right? And we'd look forward to it every Christmas, the Christmas concert. Of course getting so much time off from the classroom to practice and all that! And the principal, the last three or four practices, the principal would always be involved as well as the teacher to see that everything went properly.... And we took part in skits, recitations, things like that. Of course after the school concert then... Santa Claus would arrive. That would be exciting for us younger fellows then.

– Part of a recorded oral history interview conducted by workshop participant Peter Laracy. The full interview is archived online as part of Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative at <http://collections.mun.ca>

conducted folklore interviews, and wrote media pieces and newsletter articles about the process. Other funding supported staff travel, venue rentals, honoraria for workshop leaders and presenters, and office supplies. Much of the organization and presentation of the local concerts was done with volunteer labour.

Project Benefits

The results of the training project included: five community concerts in three communities; increased attention to non-professional performers and tradition-bearers; community members who were trained in ICH collection and cultural documentation; and a revitalization of the concert tradition, which was carried out by the community for community members, not for tourists.

The full process was documented, added to the ICH inventory, and made accessible to the public on the web. Importantly, all the money that was raised at these community concerts went back into the community, directed back into other local heritage and ICH projects.

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Our Mission

HFNL was established in 1984 to promote, preserve and protect the built heritage of the province. In 2008, HFNL was chosen to be the agency that would implement the province's ICH Strategy. Our mission is to safeguard and sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs.